

VZCZCXRO3546
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHMK #2069/01 3600752
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 260752Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY MANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6223
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHBVAKS/COMUSNAVCENT PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 002069

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

H PASS FOR SENATOR NELSON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/19/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [OREP](#) [BA](#) [BILAT](#) [HUMRIT](#) [POL](#)
SUBJECT: SENATOR NELSON DISCUSSES ELECTIONS, IRAQ WITH
PARLIAMENTARIANS, ELECTION OBSERVERS

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

.

Summary

¶1. (C) Senator Nelson December 18 met with members of both chambers of Bahrain's parliament and later with representatives of three non-governmental organizations involved in observation of the recent parliamentary and municipal elections. Al Asala (Salafi) political society member Isa Abul Fateh expressed his sadness over the increasing sectarian problems in the region, blaming the U.S. for the rise in sectarian violence in Iraq. COR member Dr. Jasim Hussein from leading Shia political society Al Wifaq encouraged U.S. engagement with all countries of the region, including Syria and Iran. On Bahrain's democratic progress, Shura Council member Jamal Fakhro spoke in favor of the cautious steps the King and GOB were taking toward political openness. Regarding election observation, NGO representatives said that the voting process was largely free and fair, but problems included campaign violations, allegations of pressure on military personnel by their leadership to vote for designated candidates, and lack of transparency at general polling stations. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Over lunch December 18, Senator Nelson (D-FL) discussed, among other issues, U.S. challenges in Iraq with parliamentary members of both Bahrain's elected body, the Council of Representatives (COR), and its appointed body, the Shura Council. Referring to the Iraq Study Group report's recommendation that the U.S. engage with Syria, Senator Nelson explained that the two purposes of his trip to the region were to explore the idea of opening a dialogue with Syria and to listen to regional interlocutors talk about their concerns over the situation in Iraq. On the former, Senator Nelson said that in their meeting, he and President al-Asad had found no common ground on issues related to Lebanon and Hizbullah, Iran, or the Israel-Palestinian conflict and Hamas. He said that he saw only one area of possible cooperation; the Syrians might be willing to move on tightening the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Concern About Iraqi Sectarian Violence

¶3. (C) COR incumbent and Al Asala member Isa Abul Fateh expressed his suspicion that the sharp increase in sectarian problems in Iraq was a sign of a hidden agenda, although he did not elaborate. Referring to Iranian influence in Bahrain, he said that up until the Iranian revolution, Bahrainis did not talk of differences between Sunnis and

Shias, but the revolution influenced the Shia population in Bahrain, thereby increasing sectarian divisions. He blamed the U.S. intervention in Iraq for the sectarian problems there. Most important in the future, he said, was for both the U.S. and Iran to leave Iraq and be prevented from interfering any more in Iraq's internal affairs. Due to the "shrinking" of our world, the interference of any country in the affairs of another causes problems that are felt not only locally, but also regionally and around the world. In the short term, however, he worried that an immediate and abrupt U.S. pull-out would spark a civil war that would spread first to Syria and Jordan, then to the Gulf and beyond.

¶4. (C) Independent COR member Latifa Al Qa'oud, who is the sole woman in the COR, stated that even Iraqis she had talked with were shocked by the level of violence in Iraq. Al Qa'oud expressed surprise that the U.S. did not have an adequate plan for Iraq after the invasion. Senator Nelson pointed out that though there were plans, there were mistakes made, one of the foremost being the dissolution of the Iraqi military. Newly-elected COR member Dr. Jasim Hussein, member of leading Shia political society Al Wifaq, encouraged increased U.S. engagement with all countries in the region, including both Syria and Iran.

Democratic Reform, Slow But Sure

¶5. (C) Moving to the subject of Bahrain's democratic progress, Senator Nelson asked about the strength of parliament's legislative power. Newly elected first vice-chair and long-term member of the Shura Council and KPMG Managing Partner Jamal Fakhro described the evolution of the

MANAMA 00002069 002 OF 003

Shura Council during his tenure, saying that the council used to have an entirely advisory role with the government. However, since the parliamentary elections in 2002 and the formation of the COR, the Shura has become more of a legislative body that reviews and votes on legislation and can call cabinet ministers for questioning on government policy. Fakhro made note of the Political Societies Law of 2005, calling it a step forward to encourage the populace to participate more actively in the political process, putting Bahrain a step ahead of its neighbors. He spoke in favor of the measured steps the King and the government were taking toward increasing levels of political empowerment of the people.

¶6. (C) Abul Fateh agreed with Fakhro on this last point, saying that if the government pushes democratic change too fast without keeping the country balanced and stable, it may collapse. Abul Fateh recognized that the COR has limited power as a legislature, but he advocated gradual liberalization, allowing time to evaluate the new changes before deciding on further steps. Referring to the opposition, he said that some political societies want to push sensitive political issues too quickly, and this could affect the stability of the nation.

¶7. (C) Responding to a question from Senator Nelson about the conduct of the Bahraini elections, Hussein said that there had been some problems, including the use of ten general polling stations that were open for voters of any of Bahrain's 40 districts. He said that the centers were vulnerable to abuse and had lacked transparency in their counting of votes. Senator Nelson asked about campaign costs and campaign finance in Bahrain, stating for comparison that his recent reelection campaign had cost approximately \$18 million, two-thirds of which was used for television time, and that in the U.S. individuals could donate no more than \$3,400 to a single candidate. Hussein said that his campaign had cost \$25,000 from his personal savings and that he had not received any direct contributions from constituents. He said that Al Wifaq had provided the equivalent of

approximately \$25,000 of in-kind contributions to his campaign. Hussein commented that campaign finance was an issue the new parliament should address.

Election Observers Share Their Experiences

18. (C) In a separate meeting December 18, Senator Nelson met with representatives of three civil society groups that were involved in observing the Bahraini elections: Dr. Jasim Al Ajmi, president of Bahrain Transparency Society and organizer of the Election Monitoring Joint Committee (EMJC); newly-appointed Shura Council member Houda Nonoo, president of Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society; and Nizar Al Qari, vice president of the Bahrain Society for Public Freedom and Democracy. Al Ajmi said that the process of polling itself was largely free and fair and that although there were irregularities, they were relatively minor. However, outside the polling stations there were campaign violations, including using mosques and clerics to campaign for some candidates and smear others, and campaigns continued into the 24-hour period before the polls opened and into election day. In addition, Al Ajmi said there had been several allegations of pressure put on rank-and-file military personnel to vote for candidates identified by their superiors, but there was a lack of hard evidence to prove this had taken place.

19. (C) Nonoo described her experience as an observer at the Bahrain International Airport general polling station. She said that the movement of observers within the polling station was restricted, and observers were not allowed to sit close to the counting tables while votes were tallied. She said many elderly voters, through their interactions with election officials, had indicated that they had been told who to vote for before entering the station. These voters did not recognize pictures of the candidates and had merely been told the name of the candidate for whom to vote. Al Ajmi confirmed that his group had received calls from observers and voters from many stations describing similar situations. He also noted that EMJC had received complaints about judges marking the wrong candidate for voters who had asked for assistance, and that some elderly voters could not understand the accent of some of the judges as many judges in Bahrain are non-Bahraini Arabs.

10. (C) Al Qari agreed that in general the process was positive, but noted that in his estimation, there had been a

MANAMA 00002069 003 OF 003

serious problem with the ten public polling stations. He said that judicial officials at several of the stations did not announce the tallies at the end of counting so that the results could later be verified by the independent observers.

Al Qari said that he had visited several polling stations and found that the level of responsiveness of the judge at each station varied widely. Some, when requested to allow the observers more freedom of movement within the station, were more flexible and listened to requests while others made no effort to grant observers wider movement.

Visit Embassy Manama's Classified Website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/manama/>

MONROE